

THE ROLE OF COLORS IN ADVERTISING

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In marketing, the use of colours is done for practical and aesthetic reasons, as colours determine the selling of a product, contribute to its individuality, create a company image. The colours of wrappers are important as some of them have the effect of catching the buyers' eye (by creating certain psychological effects at the subconscious level) and, thus, catching the buyers' interest, while others have the contrary effect (the *Pepsi blue* soft drink was a fiasco because of its colour – the same colour as rubbing alcohol).

Key words: *communication, advertising, marketing, color, effect*

The domain of colors and the visual impact they have on consumers and consumers' psyche is varied and extremely vast, as color is one of the major defining elements both for advertisements and for the world of advertising¹ on the whole. Even the lack of colors or the use of a minimalist style is meant to convey a certain message. For instance, the use of a combination such as black and white has the advantage of creating a certain contrast; on the other hand, the use of a great number of colors allows an accurate representation of the characteristics of a product; colors can function as stimuli or as incentives for catching the interest of consumers. Thus, colors are tightly linked to certain brands: red is linked with *Coca-Cola*, blue is linked with *IBM* (also known under the name of *Big Blue*²), yellow is the

¹ "A recent study on the manner in which ads are remembered, function of their chromatics, offers edifying results with respect to the impact that colors have over consumers. The decreasing order of their importance goes as follows: 1. color 2. color and *black and white* 3. *black and white*. This order is valid both for professionals (salesmen, dealers) and for the common consumer, no matter their age. One can notice that colors proper visually prevail over such chromatic values as *black and white*." (Dimitrescu, 2006, p. 148)

² "Big Blue" is another name for *IBM* "International Business Machines Corporation".

color of *Kodak*, etc. The special design of the brand name can suggest the unique quality of the product – as is the case of the strong little man (*Michelin*), of the black head (*Schwarzkopf*) or of the green crocodile (*Lacoste*). In general, advertisers choose colors with a clear intention of shocking and catching the eye (just as was the habit of the Dadaists who used to dye their hair shocking colors) and their purpose is an obvious one: to get certain effects (some of them quite sophisticated!).

In advertising, colors are used in various combinations, with the preeminence of contrasting ones; these are used with the intention of increasing the impact of advertisements on the receiving public³. However, dark colors are at the top of the scale – the more sober the color, the more easily the consumer will associate the product with elegance and luxury, unlike in the case of clear, light colours, which might create the impression of cheapness. *Rowenta* – a brand that provides a certain type of products to those persons with a higher-than-average income – makes use of navy blue and shiny black; in food industry, a relevant example is the *Carte Noire* coffee, whose black wrapper (most likely inspired by its very name) imposes an extra touch of elegance. *Moulinex* – whose target consumers are those with an average income – makes use of mostly yellow and orange.

Beyond theory and practice, colors should never be mixed without bearing in mind the manner in which people perceive them. Thus, associating a color with a certain product is not always a successful enterprise. It is the case of *Pepsi Blue*, a blue fizzy drink which was a fiasco for the *Pepsi* Company in Romania. But this is not the only case of notice. A couple of years ago, *Nestlé* also made the wrong choice when choosing a metallic gray plastic recipient for their yoghurt, which a lot of consumers associated with a medicine bottle and which did not sell as expected.

There are several theories explaining the origin of the name: *all blue* was a term used to describe a loyal *IBM* customer, and business writers later picked up the term. Another theory suggests that *Big Blue* simply refers to the Company's logo. A third theory suggests that *Big Blue* refers to a former company dress code that required many *IBM* employees to wear only white shirts and many wore blue suits. Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IBM/23.07.2009>

³ See also Pitiriciu, 2010, p. 136–143; 2011, p. 51–54.

The designers of wrappers try to associate the colors of the wrapper with the season that the respective product is launched in. Thus, every color has its own special connotation that cannot be used at random, nor can it be applied to every product. In relation to this, there was even a debate on the color of textbooks and the role that color plays in the development of one's personality⁴.

Colors are also crucial in altering perceptions. A white object looks bigger than an identical black one, and a beverage served in a red glass looks hotter than one served in a green or blue glass. This deceptive effect is exploited not only by the food industry, but also by the automotive industry: for instance, red is especially employed to emphasize the line and sides of a car. A red product of this type looks more "sporty". Automobiles such as *Ferrari*, which are by definition sport cars, are more often than not red⁵, even if there is no such color as *Ferrari red*. Instead, other companies that manufacture cars have adopted various names for various shades of red, such as *Titian red*⁶, specific to certain cars manufactured by the German company *Opel*. However, cars painted various shades of gray sell very well, since, it seems, this color is an excellent camouflage for dust stains and can help reselling the car much more easily afterwards. Psychologists⁷ have demonstrated that red

⁴ "In a similar fashion, one should not neglect the role of colors in the education of our young generations. In order to catch their interest, the books meant for the use of preschoolers are almost completely painted in vivid colors, while others are coloring books. It is also obvious that a varied array of colors for textbooks helps a pupil's retinum retain the lesson more easily, and the text's layout, augmented by diagrams and images, will more readily draw their interest than the black-and-white monotonous variant of the self-same book." (Dimitrescu, 2006, p. 148)

⁵ See the product named *Ferrari Testarossa* ("capul roșu").

Ferrari regularly uses descriptive terms related to a female's body when describing the style of their automobiles. Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferrari_Testarossa/23.07.2009.

⁶ Tiziano Vecellio (Titian) – famous Italian painter of the 16th century, member of the Venetian School.

⁷ See Mihai Golu and Aurel Dicu, *Culoare și comportament*, Craiova, 1974; Sadka Dewey, *Teste de personalitate prin alegerea culorilor*, Dewey, Bucharest, 2007.

accelerates muscular activity and yellow stimulates mental faculties, while green has relaxing qualities. This is why, *Ripolin*⁸, a company specialized in manufacturing paints, made a classification of its products which in two years registered two hundred classes function not of their use/ends (their application in bathrooms, rooms, etc.), as expected, but of the effects these colors had on consumers. With the catchy name of *Colortherapy*⁹, this line of paints includes seven sub lines: from a “moderate” line (shades of green) to a “tonifying” one (shades of yellow) and a “soothing” one, characterized by various shades of burgundy and faded pink. The conclusion that the company representatives drew after this experience was that the best sold products were clear, light colors, since they give the impression that a certain piece or product is enlarged by their use.

Among various types of representations, the image has the greatest psychological impact on the mind of the consumer. The perception and deciphering of the image are not sequential stages, they coincide, and the pictorial illustrations convey to the beholder a message that is instantly understood. A visualization of the message of the advertisement is *par excellence* a mimetic activity and, unlike its linguistic representation, it evinces a greater degree of faithfulness to reality. In spite of this, the importance of textual representation cannot and must not be ignored. Although its impact can be weakened by the mental process involved in deciphering and understanding, the linguistic message is the message of direct perception. It might be concluded that there is a deep interrelation between image and text.

In those commercials about detergents, chromatic terms have a literal, denotative meaning and are used as nouns, in the singular. Thus there are such texts as: „Mai alb, mai proaspăt, mai isteț. Albul pur. Albul sigur. Chiar și pentru sintetic”./“Whiter, fresher, cleverer. Pure white. Safe white. Even for synthetic fabrics.” Or: “Folosește Perwoll Black Magic: Negrul rămâne negru, ca nou. Negrul rămâne negru cu Perwoll Black Magic”/“Use Perwoll Black Magic: Black stays black, as when you first bought it. Black stays black with Perwoll Black Magic”¹⁰, in

⁸ *Ripolin* “special enamel, made in various shades of color”.

⁹ *Colortherapy* “chromotherapy”. The discipline studying the theory and use of colors is called *chromatology*.

¹⁰ Commercials for detergents and bleachers.

which contextual expressivity¹¹, representing a greater degree of stylistic elaborateness, presupposes the receptor/listener's understanding certain intensifying effects created by means of:

– understated comparisons: *pure white*, *safe white* or explicit ones: *as black as when it was first bought* and

– by an enumeration of adjectives with a degree of superior comparison: *whiter*, *fresher*, *cleverer* – the use of the term *fresh* refers to the fresh smell that the respective detergent may offer to laundry; *clever* has to do with the detergent's capacity to lower costs and save money (buying such a detergent is profitable, the ratio cost-quality is advantageous), and laundry gets *whiter* if washed with the *clever* detergent. *Pure*, a synonym for *immaculate*, probably refers to the power of washing that the detergent has: once washed with this detergent, laundry gets immaculate, stain-free.

The way in which the colors of freshly laundered clothing are presented is extremely important¹², which is why the commercial's text referring to *Perwoll Black Magic* mentions the noun *black* no less than four times, a repetition that suggests the intensity of the color, which stays unchanged.

In his *Essays in Hermeneutics*, Paul Ricœur, proposes certain features¹³ specific to the linguistic structure of the sentence¹⁴ and which constitute the starting point of the elaboration of discourse hermeneutics. These features¹⁵ can also be applied to the above-mentioned advertisements. The texts are addressed to an interlocutor¹⁶/receptor; one clue in this

¹¹ Cf. Stoichițoiu Ichim, 2006, p. 112.

¹² The color of the clothes a person wears has a major impact on the people around. Referring to this, Coco Chanel said “a badly dressed woman is remembered for her clothes with inappropriate colors. But a well-dressed woman is remembered for herself.” (apud Henderson, Henshaw, 2008, p. 6)

¹³ With respect to the feature by which the “discourse instance” is self-referential, the examples above are not so helpful when it comes down to pointing the manner in which the author is individualized.

¹⁴ In Paul Ricœur's acceptance, *the sentence* is the basic unit of discourse.

¹⁵ They are in fact an analysis of commercial discourse/text.

¹⁶ “(...) while language is but a condition of communication for which it offers codes, all messages are exchanged through discourse. From this point of view, discourse presupposes not only a world but also another one, the interlocutor to whom it is addressed.” (Ricœur, 1995, p. 155)

respect is the affirmative imperative form of the verb (*to*) *use/folosește*. The message of these texts is a descriptive one, where “the symbolic function of the language is activated”¹⁷, and its temporal realization “selects” the present form of the verb¹⁸, as is demonstrated by the indicative present verb form *rămâne*.

The 70’s of the past century used the term *albol* as a generic term for any detergent, since those were times when there were no advertisements for detergents (and their „cleaning power” was not as great). The term is derived from the adjective *alb* (white) with a suffix (*-ol*)¹⁹ and is not registered by any Romanian dictionary. This suffix is also to be found in other Romanian derivatives such as: *azurol* “blue cleaning fluid” or *apretol* – “fluid used as starch”; all these terms are in their turn substances used for the bleaching and starching of laundry.

Nowadays, when neither *albol* nor *azurol* are in fashion (and they are not even present in Romanian dictionaries), one makes use of a *Sistem Inteligent de Selectare a Petelor* (an intelligent system of stain selection), that is *Vanish* [ˈvæniʃ]. In order to make more attractive a process such as bleaching and stain removal, the commercial recommends: “Ai încredere în roz, uită de pete”./“Have faith in pink, forget about stains”. The noun *pink* is a metonymy – the colour of the wrapper stands for the product itself.

Another Romanian advertisement reads: “Romtelecom a lansat serviciul telverde! Oriunde vezi numărul 08008 (urmat de 5 sau 6 cifre), poți da telefon liniștit, pentru că este gratuit.”/“Romtelecom has launched the telgreen service. Wherever you see the number 08008 (followed by 5 or 6 digits), you can make a phonecall without worry, since it is free of charge”²⁰. As is apparent in the context, *telverde* (an acronym) stands for “a phone number who can be dialed free of charge”. The same

¹⁷ Ricœur, 1995, p. 155.

¹⁸ “(...) discourse is always temporally realized in the present, while the system of language is virtual, outside of the boundaries of time.” (Ricœur, 1995, p. 155)

¹⁹ “This suffix can be used to derive only nouns and could not be detached from neologisms such as *benzol*, *mentol*, *naftol*, *sidol*, *terpinol*, *vitriol*, etc., some of which can be decomposable even in Romanian.” (Hrîstea, 1968, p. 37)

²⁰ *Ziarul Adevărul*, 1.06.2001, p. 16.

significance is also attached to the phrase *număr verde* (green number). These phrases make use of the adjective *verde* (green) with a meaning of free access, gratuity.

The assertion “Aroma verde îmi conturează silueta”/“The green fragrance emphasizes my figure”²¹ is printed on the wrapper of a “natural” product for weight loss. Since the noun *aromă* (fragrance)²² refers to smell (and taste) only and cannot have color, *verde* probably sends to the green coffee extract²³ that is part of the product. *Silueta* (one’s figure), well emphasized as a result of assimilating green coffee pills sends to the idea of *verde*, that is to youth (since green is a symbol of youthfulness) and implicitly sends to the idea of a supple body and a firm skin. Consequently, it appears that color induces a youthful appearance, no matter the consumer’s age.

In the case of an advertisement for toothpaste, *Colgate Triple Action*, the advertiser makes use of a narrative mode: “El este Mihai, este îndrăgostit și are respirația proaspătă. Tatăl lui are un loc de muncă mai bun. El are dinții albi. Sora lui, Diana, are un dinte nou. Ea are nevoie de protecție anticarie. Mama are tot ce le trebuie: Colgate Triple Action. Ți împăspătează respirația, îți face dinții albi și te protejează împotriva cariilor. Triplă acțiune! O supermamă are încredere în Colgate Triple Action. Proștețime, albire și protecție!”/“He is Mihai, he is in love and his breath is fresh. His dad has a better work place. He has white teeth. His sister, Diana, has a new tooth. She needs anticavity protection. Their mom has what they need: Colgate Triple Action. It freshens your breath it whitens your teeth and it protects you against cavities. Triple action!”) As this presentation shows, through its whitening effect, toothpaste contributes to getting and keeping self-confidence. As a matter of fact, ever since the Renaissance, a new beauty requirement has been on, according to which white teeth are an important condition, an essential condition in fact. Therefore, white color in teeth can offer a pleasant aspect, it is a condition for success, just as green presupposes youthfulness, strength and vigor.

²¹ See the product *Pentru slăbit și anticelulitic* from *Alevia SRL*, Suceava (www.alevia.com.ro)

²² *Aromă/fragrance* “a pleasant smell, which is specific, strong, persistent; a substance that confers a pleasant flavour to a food product.” (*DEXI*, 2007, p. 131)

²³ Cf. It. *verde caffè*.

Advertisements also make use of slogans²⁴, as is the case of a text such as “Viitorul va fi verde sau nu va fi deloc”/“The future will either be green or it will not be at all”²⁵. In this context, the term *verde* (green) has a denotative value: it is a symbol of nature and of living “naturally”²⁶ – in an overindustrialized epoch that threatens with a complete destruction of nature. If *viitorul va fi verde, casele/ the future is green, houses* have already started to be *verzi/ green*²⁷, that is they are houses built from certain materials whose interior contains only products that are eco-friendly²⁸. The campaign launched by the Caravan *Umbrela Verde* and *Omuleții Verzi, the green umbrella and little green men*²⁹, with the slogan: “De acum orașul tău este mai verde!”/“From now on your city is greener!” has the same purpose: to protect the surrounding environment. That is why there are also green wrappers (*plase verzi/ the green bags*), that is biodegradable bags.

Cod Verde/Green Code, is the name of an advertising campaign which hopes to draw attention to the important environment-related issues³⁰, to educate and direct as many Romanians towards a proper behaviour, which means protecting the environment (*ecoprotector/“eco-protective”*) instead of ruining it.

Another significance of green is related to its association with certain countries. Green, the color of freshness, signals the existence of mint, which is in its turn related to freshness. For a better recognition of their

²⁴ Slogans of this type, in which names of colors are present, appeared in the 60’s of the past century, in America – a good illustration is *Black Power!*, which revealed the necessity of transforming the discourse of African-Americans into an instrument of protest.

²⁵ Advertisements for ecological products.

See the cover of *Tabu* magazine, no. 4 (April)/2009.

²⁶ In consonance with nature, without polluting and destroying it.

²⁷ See *Elle Decoration*, 35/2009, p. 20–21.

²⁸ Even *iluminatul* (illumination) is *verde* (green), that is done by means of economy bulbs.

²⁹ *Omuleții verzi* (the little green people), whose purpose is protecting the environment are not the same thing as (and have nothing in common with) aliens.

³⁰ “The term ‘chromatic’ draws attention to ecology, to a respect towards nature, the necessity of cleanliness, health (...).” (Pitiriciu, 2009, p. 118)

mint properties, green is also present on the package of menthol cigarettes. Another similar situation is represented by white products. Just as green products are related to ecological products (with the exception of menthol cigarettes, of course), white products are related to refrigerators, washing machines, dish-washers, air conditioning, etc., all initially manufactured with white cases³¹.

As was demonstrated, colors can have an informative function, making communication easier; they can also be employed for the selling of products, for drawing customers' attention to a product (by its color the product becomes more desirable) and to a manufacturer. Since they have this function, colors become functional, but the preference for colors is not conditioned only by aspects related to a visual perception, but also by beliefs or "tastes" in the final analysis.

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РОЛЯТА НА ЦВЕТОВЕТЕ В РЕКЛАМНОТО ОБЩУВАНЕ

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В маркетинговите дейности използването на цветове се прави на първо място по практически и естетически съображения, тъй като цветовете са, които определят продажбата на един продукт, участват в индивидуализацията на продукта, създават представата за една фирма. Цветовете на опаковката на продуктите са важни, някои имат директен ефект, привличайки погледите на купувачите (чрез създаването на определени психологически ефекти на нивото на подсъзнанието), а други имат отблъскващ ефект (газираното питие *Пепси блу* например беше неуспешно заради своя цвят – същия като на медицинския спирт).

Ключови думи: съобщение, реклама, маркетинг, цвят, ефект.